

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Mussolini Rejects the American Approach

Telegram 500 from Chargé Kirk in Italy to the Secretary of State, August 19, 1935

Mussolini received me shortly before 11: 30 this morning and I left his office at noon. I presented him with a copy of the message contained in your 136, August 18, 1 p.m., and explained to him that it was a personal and confidential message sent to him by the Secretary of State at the direction of the President which the Department would not give out to the press.

Mussolini read the message carefully. He then asked me to convey to the President and the Secretary his appreciation of the expression of friendliness and of the character of the message. As to the subject matter, however, it was now too late to avoid an armed conflict. Italy, he continued, had mobilized a million men and had spent two billion lire. Two hundred thousand men had already been sent to East Africa and 150,000 more were ready to go at any time. Two Black Shirt divisions were being sent out this week and others were to follow.

In the face of this preparation and the sacrifices which it implied, any alteration in purpose now would be absolutely disastrous to Italy and would entail consequences from which she would not recover for a century. No nation, and he specifically referred to the United States, could expect that Italy could draw back now and destroy her prestige in incurring the disdain of other countries who would be ready to accuse her of having attempted to bluff or of having engaged in an undertaking which she found she was unable to carry out. Six months ago perhaps some solution might have been found but the opposition of other countries and England in particular, although it had brought the Italian people unanimously to the support of the Government, had strengthened the position of the Negus so that now only a military defeat at the hands of Italy could accomplish the ends which Italy had a right to obtain.

Mussolini went on to say that for years Italy had made every effort to cooperate with the Abyssinians to the mutual advantage of both countries. Practically everything that had been done to improve the condition of the Abyssinians and advance their progress along modern lines had been due to the Italians. The treaty of 1928 was intended to declare this policy of amity and to render this collaboration effective.

This treaty, however, had remained entirely ineffective owing to the attitude of the Abyssinians and all efforts to give effect to the purposes of the treaty were of no avail. Even in connection with the construction of the road to Assab as an outlet to the sea for Abyssinia, Italy had met with the opposition of the Abyssinian Government and no progress could be made. It is true, he added, that during that time the influence of the French which during those years was unfriendly towards Italy, was a factor in negating Italy's efforts at cooperation in Abyssinia but the main difficulty lay in Abyssinia's attitude toward Italy herself. Italy in 1896 had lost the battle of Adowa. That was 40 years ago and the circumstances were such that Italy herself need not harbor a necessity for revenge. The Abyssinians, however, regarded Adowa as the triumph of their force over a powerful white nation and this spirit, which had been encouraged by the friendly attitude and support of other European nations, had created a situation in Abyssinia which absolutely precluded the possibility on the part of Italy of safeguarding or developing her legitimate interests. This situation could only be met by a display of force and could only be remedied by inflicting a defeat on the Abyssinians.

The Abyssinians, Mussolini continued, were known to have 450,000 men under arms. Their military plan was to retreat before the Italian advance and then when the Italian lines were extended to launch attacks against those lines in the form of guerilla warfare. The Abyssinians were not taking sufficiently into account the Italian airforce which would eliminate the chance of success of these tactics. Mussolini expressed complete confidence in the outcome of this military set-up and he intimated that he believed it would be brief. He indicated that following this phase negotiations for a final adjustment would be simple and in this connection he pointed out the success of Italian administration in Eritrea where great progress along modern lines had been made and where no opposition on the part of the natives had been encountered.

In giving the foregoing account Mussolini took pains to emphasize general attitude so far as envisaging the matter solely from the point of view that the conflict would be confined exclusively to Italy and Abyssinia and had been alluding to the

part played by other governments only insofar as they affected the relations between two countries. If the conflict could be so limited he said no anxiety need be felt as to the consequences. He went on to say, however, that the attitude of England had brought to the fore the possibility that it might not be so confined and in that event he foresaw the gravest consequences to the peace of the world. . . . England, he said, might profess not to know what Italy really wanted in Abyssinia but she knew very well and that was first and foremost the military occupation of the country. . . .

As regards the future stage in the negotiations he said Italy had prepared an exhaustive statement of her case which would be laid before the League of Nations. When that was presented the League would have to choose between Italy and Abyssinia. If Abyssinia were ejected from the League Italy would proceed with her plans in Abyssinia which he declared could then be regarded as having the character of high police measures enforced by he pointed out were successfully carried out without grave international complications. If, however, he went on to say, the League should fail to uphold Italy's position there would be only one course open to Italy, namely, to disregard the views of the member nations and proceed with the undertaking on which Italy had already embarked and carried to so high a stage of development. The dangers implicit in such a course if it became necessary he recognized as of the utmost gravity. Italy would be confronted with the opposition of other countries and if that opposition developed into actual interference

such as any attempt to block the Suez Canal, Italy would regard such an attempt as an hostile act and would take measures accordingly. The conflict with Abyssinia he repeatedly characterized as a matter of vital interest to Italy. This conflict must be settled once for all at this time for the effort which had been expended and the sacrifices which were being made could never be repeated. If Italy, he reiterated, would be allowed to settle that conflict without interference there need be no danger to world peace. If however any nation or nations should interfere Italy would be compelled to pursue her course regardless of opposition and the consequences then might prove disastrous.

Mussolini concluded this conversation by again expressing his appreciation of the character of the message from the President.

I might add that Mussolini appeared in excellent health and spirits and showed no trace of the nervousness noted by the French (see Paris Embassy's telegram No. 697, August 17, 9 a.m.) which has since been explained by certain climatic conditions prevailing at that time to which he is known to be susceptible. He gave an impression of calmness and confidence and was obviously desirous of availing himself of an opportunity to state his case in the way in which he wanted it to be understood. His conversation which was in French was free, emphatic and informal in tone.

Foregoing message repeated nowhere.

KIRK

Source

United States Department of State, *United States Department of State/ Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, General, the Near East and Africa, 1935*, pp. 739-742

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